

Today we continue our new sermon series entitled, "Faces of Our Faith." Today's faces of faith aren't very well known, which is all the more reason to know a little context. The book of Numbers, the fourth book of the Bible, hosts the story of Israel's journey from Mount Sinai, where Israel entered into covenant with God to the edge of the Promised Land. As my preaching professor says, "The book of Numbers isn't exactly go-to reading for many of us" (Anna Carter Florence, *A is for Alabaster*). Like last week, we begin with chaos. "Rebellion, revolt, betrayal, and politics. One big crisis after another, for forty years. Just for fun- multiple choice question: In the forty years the children of Israel were in the wilderness, how many rebellions were there? A) 0, B) 1, C) 7, D) 10. The answer is 10, at least, as God counts them. Ten- ironic, given how many commandments on stone tablets Moses had just lugged down Mount Sinai, right before the book of Numbers begins. People were caught up in the blame game that follows many years of too many hardships. When you can't keep faith, you keep score. You also keep careful accounts" (ACF). This book begins with God calling for a census to be taken among men 20 years and older to account for any able to go to war. All of this was in preparation for Israel's departure from the mountain and entry into Canaan, the Promised Land, as an army. Along their continued journey, some of the people rebel against God, Moses and his brother, Aaron. One of those rebellious groups involved Korah, one of Levi's great grandsons, and therefore, a Levite, who along with 250 other Israelite male leaders, confronted Moses and Aaron, saying "You have gone too far" (16:3)! They thought Moses was being a little too big for his britches. God dealt harshly with Korah and the others

who led a revolt, swallowing them up into the earth (v. 32). Stories like these in the book of Numbers reflect human struggle to live in the present moment, while remembering their oppressive past in Egypt and anxiously anticipating living on the Promised Land (*The Discipleship Study Bible*, NRSV, p. 223). Later there was a 2nd census taken leading up to our story this morning, for the purposes of determining land distribution amongst the descendants of the twelve tribes of Israel. There were a lot of numbers being calculated, hence the name of this book. God, who gives the land, told Moses that each tribe's territory would be determined by lottery, and each man would receive a parcel of land in his tribe's territory. In a patriarchal society, when the man dies, his sons inherited the property, thus ensuring it always stayed in the family to which it was originally assigned. Women and children were left off the list of participants of either census, as they couldn't serve in the military nor be landowners. But what if a man died and only had daughters? What would happen to his portion of the land in this case? Before we find out by reading God's Word, let us pray. **PRAY. READ.**

Did you know that the daughters of Zelophehad are mentioned by name five times in the Old Testament (Numbers 27, and 36, Joshua 17 and 1 Chronicles 7) but they aren't in the regular preaching cycle for churches? I'm embarrassed to say that the only reason I've ever heard of the daughters of Zelophehad is because of the location of my maternal grandparents' home: Tirzah, SC, which sits in between the cities of Rock Hill and York. I learned from my grandmother, Mama Dot, that the name of their unincorporated community was biblical. "Tirzah" was both a

Canaanite city in the book of Joshua and the name of one of the five daughters of Zelophehad in the book of Numbers.

Tirzah and her four sisters, Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, and Milcah, were the daughters of Zelophehad, who was the great, great, great grandson of Joseph. Zelophehad was a member of the clan of Hephherite and from the tribe of Manasseh (one of the twelve tribes of Israel), which at the time of the 2<sup>nd</sup> census had 52,700 people enrolled (Numbers 26:34). “Zelophehad, born a slave, was among the original company to leave Egypt. Yet, he must have taught his daughters their place in the family story, that they could trace their lineage right back to Hebrew patriarchs and Egyptian nobility. His legacy is that he taught his daughters the numbers that matter, the ten commandments, one promise that God is with them, always and together they walked the long road to justice” (ACF). Now a generation, including Zelophehad, had passed away and a new generation, including these daughters, had come up. Interestingly, a chapter before today’s story, in the midst of a long list of males collected in the census, there is a list of the daughters of Zelophehad. Why were five women’s names on a list that didn’t even count women? We soon find out why. The law didn’t consider their unique situation. What would happen to a deceased man’s property when he had no sons only daughters, especially if the goal was to keep it in the tribe? His daughters came forward- they came forward on the shoulders of their ancestors from their paternal family tree. They came forward uncalled and uninvited. They came forward- without authority or voice. Nevertheless, they persisted. They came forward and stood publicly

before Moses, the priest, the tribe chieftains, and the entire community with a concern over how the Promised Land was to be divided to their family. Their father had died in the wilderness, and they were worried that they wouldn't receive his share of the land. The Lord had already told Moses how to divide up the land for inheritance; however, these five sisters point out a legal problem when there are no male heirs to inherit the family property. With no father nor brothers nor husbands nor in-laws to inherit property, Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah would be left with nothing and so they challenged the status quo, standing before their community. Cue the court music from Judge Judy.

These five sisters come forward together to state their case- one of the earliest lawsuits on record. The courtroom, so to speak, was the tent of meeting, a holy, set aside and sacred place where God dwelled. These five women were a united front as they publicly presented their petition to Moses. According to the midrash, which is an interpretive act in Jewish tradition seeking answers to religious questions, each sister said a few lines of the petition. There was no spokeswoman for the group. In other words, there was solidarity and a spirit of cooperation among them. They came forward as one, strong unit making an effort to effect change on behalf of their entire community. Some of us may have expected that these sisters would have kept quiet about their interpretation of God's justice and law and just accepted things "the way they were and always had been." As women, how easy it could've been for them to talk themselves out of their moment but who would that have benefited?! In addition to everything else going against these

women, there was no place or forum for Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah to state their case, hence the reason they went to the tent of meeting. As women without men in their immediate lives, they had the most to lose if their community dismissed them. Earlier in the book of Numbers, Moses' own sister, Miriam, contracted leprosy for a week after daring to question her brother's judgement (Ch. 12). Surely this was an example these sisters knew had happened?! Nevertheless, they persisted. They refused to settle, taking action, but they did it in a very prudent way. Maybe they did this because they believed that God was with them as a God of justice and that God's mercy extends to all God's children? Maybe they did it because they trusted that God, for whom nothing is impossible, would prevail on their behalf and justice would be done? We don't know because we aren't told; nevertheless, they persisted. Notice how diplomatic they were in their approach. There can be an art to how you say something. One scholar notes that "their argument, 'Let not our father's name be lost to his clan,' was one that could find a sympathetic response in the ears of the male leaders. In doing so, the women displayed an understanding of the constraints of the patriarchal society in which they lived" (Dr. Brenda Bacon, The Schechter Institutes, <https://schechter.edu/the-daughters-of-zelophehad>, 2003). Rather than argue that daughters should inherit property equally with sons, they limited their demand to cases where there were no sons. In other words, "their demand was not a threat to the patriarchal order, but rather in accordance with the male concern for continuity" (Bacon). They also mentioned that their father wasn't involved with Korah's rebellion, but he died of his own sin. What does

that mean? I mentioned in some of the context what Korah's rebellion was. Some scholars believe that Korah was Moses' least favorite, thus the reason why the daughters would state that their father wasn't involved with him. Others say that maybe Zelophehad was involved in something individually, but it didn't involve others. Regardless of what it was, Zelophehad's "sin" obviously wasn't bad enough to get him removed from this inheritance list. These daughters knew enough to help them clearly make their argument. They chose their moment and words carefully, and they knew their history and culture well. The 3 C's from last week: chaos, choices, and courage apply to these sisters as well.

Moses, not knowing how to answer these exceedingly wise and articulate sisters, brings their unprecedented case before God (27:5). Notice what Moses doesn't do. He doesn't immediately dismiss them and tell them to never speak of this again. He doesn't belittle them or laugh in their face. Moses takes Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah seriously, as well as God, of course. And a change came. You know, "God is full of surprises, even for Moses. Yet the generations rise and fall away, and new ideas emerge, new ways of counting and sorting. When we realize the numbers are off, we start again; we count on a bigger scale. We include the daughters of Zelophehad because they're inheritors with us" (ACF). God not only sided with the daughters (27:6) and instructed Moses to give them their father's inheritance but God said to make a new law- a place at the table to include these women as inheritors. Later in the book of Numbers, the question of marriage and

possible property transfer comes up for these daughters, and God decides that they must marry within their tribe so that the land stays within the family and that's what they did (36:1-13). What would it look like for you and for me to approach an injustice with such wisdom, courage, and boldness? What holds us back from coming forward as Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah did? May they inspire us in our faith, as we walk together the long road to justice: living now in the present yet confident in what God has promised for the future. Amen.